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ABSTRACT

This study explored actual on-the-job behavior of superintendents to develop a composite view of administrative behavior. Eight superintendents working within a 150-mile radius of Edmonton were observed at work and structural data was recorded. Findings from the observational technique used were supplemented by data collected through interviews and work records. Results showed that one of the primary pressures on a superintendent was the problem of organizing and controlling his or her time. Thus findings refuted the stereotype of an administrator as planner, organizer, and coordinator. (Author/LD)

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# ADMINISTRATIVE BEHAVIOR OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

Patrick Duignan

## Introduction

This study was conducted in an attempt to answer the deceptively simply, but fundamental questions, "What does a school superintendent actually do on the job? What is the nature and content of a superintendent's administrative behavior?"

The chief executive of any organization performs a variety of tasks and functions in the process of discharging his administrative responsibilities. While much has been written concerning managerial processes, tasks, and functions there is a general lack of descriptive material concerning the specific content of managerial work. In other words, there is a scarcity of studies in the literature that describe what managers or executives actually do.

The literature related to the school superintendent is also open to the same criticism. The emphasis in most studies is either on a superintendent's perception of what he thinks he is doing or ought to be doing or on the expectations held by others for his role.

This lacuna in the literature provided encouragement for pursuing the present exploration as a relatively untapped approach to describing and analyzing the administrative behaviors of school superintendents.

The central problem of the study was to observe and describe the actual on-the-job behavior of the superintendent of schools so as to develop a composite view of his administrative behavior.

A stratified random sample of eight superintendents -- four from divisions and four from counties -- was selected from all the superintendents having at least 100 teachers within their jurisdiction and located within a 150 mile radius of Edmonton. The two city districts were excluded because they were considered atypical of the division and county systems. All eight superintendents selected agreed to participate in the study.

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Methodology

A field-study approach was employed to generate an analytic description of the superintendent's work. Structured observation was chosen as the primary method to study the superintendent at work. An extensive review of the relevant literature indicated that the structured observational technique of data gathering had not been used to study the administrative behavior of school superintendents. Therefore, it could provide a new perspective on what is known about administrative behavior in school systems.

In addition, the structured observational method provides data with a wide range of detail and with whole events preserved. This method is, therefore, particularly suitable for the study of people at work in their natural settings.

The observational technique was used by Mintzberg (1968) in his study of five chief executives of organizations. Others have used structured observation in their study of work behavior in management. Mintzberg pointed out that this methodology combines the "inductive power of observation" with the "structure of systematic recording", thus enabling the researcher to "study systematically and comprehensively those parts of managerial work that are not well understood".

The actual observations were conducted during the months of October, November, and December, 1977. Two of the superintendents were observed for two days and six were observed for five days each, for a total of 34 days of observation.

Structural data were recorded on each superintendent's behavior throughout every minute of each day during the observation period and on all his mail and verbal contacts. This resulted in a chronology record, a contact record and a mail record.

In addition to the data thus collected - low inference data - the researcher collected high inference data: the researcher's theoretical notes and categories of purpose. A theoretical note refers to the record of the development of the researcher's thoughts about the meaning of the observed data. A large number of theoretical notes were derived

from the attempt to obtain meaning from the observed behaviors.

The purposes for which verbal and mail contacts were made were also recorded.

The observational technique led to the development of clusters or constellations of management behavior. The findings were supplemented by data collected through interviews, and information on the superintendent's activities for the week prior to the observation period. A synthesis of the data generated through these techniques led the researcher to the findings that describe what superintendents actually do in their positions in the school systems.

Study Findings

The superintendent averaged 8.2 hours of working time each day, often working through lunch and coffee breaks. He averaged 38 different activities each day, of which 65 per cent lasted less than ten minutes each and 39 per cent lasted less than five minutes each.

There was a general lack of continuity in the superintendent's work. This was due, partly, to the fact that he had to deal each day with a great number of issues and problems of varied composition.

Although the superintendent spent 20 per cent of his working time sitting at his desk, these desk-work sessions lasted on average just over ten minutes each. This inability to devote longer periods of his time to concentrated work session was due, primarily, to frequent interruptions by a variety of individuals who either called on the telephone or dropped in for a quick unscheduled meeting. The superintendent spent 25 per cent of his working time in unscheduled meetings that lasted on average ten minutes. The majority, or 54 per cent, of unscheduled meetings were initiated by other people. Approximately 44 per cent of all the superintendent's telephone calls were initiated by others. In addition, over 45 per cent of the superintendent's total verbal contacts and 72 per cent of his total mail items were initiated by others.

A major feature of the superintendent's administrative behavior was the amount of time he spent in verbal interaction with other people. Most of his verbal contacts were with members of his school system, especially those system members who were involved with the administration of the system. The superintendent averaged 26 verbal contacts each day and these contacts took up, approximately, 70 per cent of his daily working time. Approximately, 70 per cent of his verbal contacts and verbal contact time was spent with school trustees, members of his central office staff and school-based administrators. Less than 7 per cent of his verbal contact time was spent with teachers and less than half of 1 per cent with students. The superintendent had little verbal contact with the Department of Education or other superintendents - 1 per cent and 1.2 per cent, respectively, of total working time. Approximately 87 per cent of the superintendent's verbal contact time was spent with people from his own school system (including parents).

These contacts were initiated for a variety of purposes. Over 37 per cent of all the superintendent's verbal contacts were for the purpose of making requests. Further analysis revealed that almost 70 per cent of the requests made by the superintendent were for the purpose of obtaining information. In addition, the superintendent devoted 9 per cent of his total contacts to the giving of information to others.

Another feature of the superintendent's administrative behavior was the number of problems that came to his attention each day. Almost 15 per cent of his verbal contacts were concerned with problems. Personnel problems took about 84 per cent of the total time devoted to problem issues.

There has been an ongoing discussion both in the literature and amongst practitioners in education as to whether the superintendent is, primarily, an executive and manager representing the interests

of the school board, or an educational leader representing the views of teachers and their profession. The fact that just over 70 per cent of his verbal contacts were with policy makers and system administrators and only 9 per cent with teachers and pupils, tended to support the contention that the superintendent is primarily an executive. In addition, an analysis of the content of his verbal contacts provided further support for this argument. Over 72 per cent of the superintendent's verbal contacts were categorized as being executive in nature and just over 25 per cent as educational.

## Conclusions

The observational data on the eight superintendents tended to indicate that the superintendent's administrative behavior was not, generally, as planned and organized as is sometimes suggested in the literature. He dealt with a large number and variety of issues and problems each day and he rarely enjoyed the luxury of being able to concentrate for long periods of time on any one task.

It was also difficult for the superintendent to spend his working time in accordance with pre-established plans or priorities, because certain events or activities often triggered a series of reactions from him that lasted for a whole morning, a whole day, or even longer. This "chain-reaction phenomenon" was observed on numerous occasions by the researcher.

One of the primary pressures on the superintendent, therefore, was the problem of organizing and controlling his time. The superintendents indicated that they never had sufficient time available to do all the things that required doing, and they unanimously indicated that "the pressure of time" was the most frustrating aspect of their jobs. Part of this frustration derived from the fact that the superintendent had to deal with a great number and variety of problems each day, many of which dealt with personnel conflicts. These personnel problems tended to take up a considerable amount of the superintendents working time.

The superintendent's inability to control his time was due, partly, to the fact that he had no definite time allocating procedures and he was generally committed to an open-door policy in dealing with his subordinates. He rarely adopted an economizing view of alternative time use, in terms of a return to time invested. The allocation of his time was based, generally, on his perception of the consequences of not attending to an issue. In other words, the decision on what to do next was based on his perception of the potential explosiveness of an issue.

The superintendent's practice of being readily accessible to his subordinates tended to encourage these impromptu interruptions. This emphasis on accessibility, together with the fact that most subordinates did not like to be dealt with in a perfunctory fashion placed increased pressure on the superintendent's already pre-empted time schedule.

The superintendent was the key figure in the informational network of his school system. In fact, he acted as the system's information broker, gathering and disseminating large amounts of information through such verbal media as telephone calls, and scheduled and unscheduled meetings. He tried to keep himself informed of current happenings and events throughout his system.

The pressure of time and the informational burden placed on him posed a number of dilemmas for the superintendent in his work. The major dilemmas for the superintendent identified in this study were:

1. how to balance pace and quality in relation to his work behavior;
2. how to deal with current and emergent issues while still endeavoring to plan for long-range issues;
3. how to make efficient use of his time while at the same time endeavoring to run a humanistic organization;
4. how to apportion his time between activities that were managerial in nature and those that were educational; and
5. how to manage his information system so that current and relevant information was available and accessible when required.

In summary, the findings of this study tend to refute the stereotype picture of the administrator as planner, organizer and coordinator. Instead of the calm and controlled practitioner who diagnoses problems

and potential problems, generates alternatives and then chooses the optimum solution, one sees a more frustrated individual who is faced with an array of problems and crises of varied composition. Confronted with the myriad tasks and responsibilities of his job, the administrator rarely finds sufficient time to analyze his problems and plan his strategies.

The administrator's primary response to the situation in which he finds himself is to take some form of action, such as, making a telephone call, initiating a discussion with an associate or subordinate, or writing a letter or memo. His actions, however, are frequently governed by the dictates of others and he has to perform his job while being subjected to frequent interruptions and the constant pressure of insufficient time.